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What Kind of Propaganda Reaches You? Patterns of Russian Far Right Information Dissemination

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of Russian far right propaganda on Telegram between 2018 and 2023 using a large-scale, multilingual dataset of over 15 million messages. Source actors produced content in Russian and strategically translated it into target audiences' national lan- guages, revealing a coordinated cross-national diffusion strategy. Methodologically, the study introduces a multilingual, stemmed dictionary for far right discourse detection,developed from the international literature and expanded through manual term selection and language-specific stemming into structured semantic clusters. The dictionary was validated in embedding space and iteratively refined, enabling the classification of more than two-thirds of the corpus. By in- tegrating entropy measures and channel-level language attribution, the analysis captures both thematic stability and narrative diversification. Findings show a strong reliance on redistribut- ing external media content, stable core ideological frames, and cyclical issue-specific peaks, with higher entropy during periods of political turbulence.

Keywords: *Far Right; Propaganda; Telegram; Russia; Computational Social Science.*

1. Introduction

Far-right communication and propaganda have been widely examined at the national level. However, in contemporary literature what remains lacking is a comprehensive, cross-national analy- sis spanning an extended time frame that systematically captures how narratives evolve across different political phases and critical events.

This work seeks to bridge this gap by integrating existing national-level studies on Spain (Calderón et al., 2020), Portugal (Cardoso et al., 2025), Germany (Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023), and the United Kingdom (Lowe, 2024; Newth et al., 2025), as well as broader European analyses (Feischmidt & Hervik, 2015). Building on these contributions, it introduces a comparative and longitudinal perspective that leverages temporal

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and geolocated variables, operationalized through language use and reference channels, to systematically exam- ine cross-national variation and narrative shifts over time (Giuffrida et al., 2022; Mazzeo Rinaldi et al., 2020).

Beyond national case studies, the relationship between far-right mobilization and foreign influ- ence, particularly Russian strategic communication (Russo, 2025), has been examined for more than a decade in social media within political communication, security studies, and international relations research (Laruelle et al., 2015). . Rather than emerging suddenly in the context of recent electoral interference, the nexus between extremist narratives and Russian information strategy has been conceptualized as part of a broader architecture of hybrid influence and geopolitical destabilization.

Early empirical work questioned the actual effectiveness of Russian state propaganda (Gerber & Zavisca, 2016), suggesting that propaganda is most effective among already predisposed audiences, functioning less as a tool of conversion and more as an instrument of reinforcement and attitudinal consolidation. This insight is crucial in reframing propaganda not as unilateral persuasion, but as a mechanism embedded within polarized information ecosystems.

This analysis is reinforced by content analysis (Yang et al., 2024), highlighting that Russian pro- paganda frequently capitalizes on pre-existing controversies, strategically amplifying divisive themes rather than independently driving the news cycle.

The same applies to the polarizing aspect of messages from Russian engagement with the far right (Butt & Byman, 2020; Nanuashvili, 2020), evidencing a deliberate strategy aimed at deep- ening polarization within Western democracies, enhancing domestic instability, and contrasting liberal democratic "chaos" with the image of authoritarian stability promoted internally by the Kremlin. These actions are also part of a Russian strategy to enhance Russia as a geopolitical and ideological reference point for nationalist and Eurosceptic actors (Shekhovtsov, 2017), es- pecially after the Crimea events in 2014 (Laruelle et al., 2015).

A significant shift in Russian information operations emerged with the so-called Doppelgänger campaign, which moved beyond media amplification toward a combination of narrative engi- neering and technical impersonation.

1.1. Doppelgänger

The Doppelgänger operation denotes a coordinated Russian information campaign uncovered be- tween 2022 and 2024, based on the large-scale cloning of legitimate Western news websites. In- stead of using overtly state-affiliated broadcasters (such as RT or Sputnik), it replicated the visual identity and domain structures of established European media brands, embedding pro-Kremlin narratives within seemingly credible journalistic environments and appropriating institutional trust.

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By adapting language to national contexts while maintaining thematic coordination, it illustrates a qualitative shift toward the convergence of narrative engineering and infrastructural manip- ulation (Gajewska & Katulski, 2025; Gergelewicz, 2024; Milenkosi, 2024; Rakov, 2025). A clearer interpretation of this evolution is offered in two works by the NATO Strategic Commu- nications Centre of Excellence (StratCom), evidencing how Russian strategic communication does not rely on a single, centralized model, but instead combines different tools and narratives depending on context (Daukšas & Venclauskienė, 2025), without excluding possible observable patterns in synchronised publication timings or recurring narratives to influence and mobilise public opinion (Dikhtiarenko et al., 2026).

Taken together, these contributions frame Doppelgänger not as an isolated episode, but as a paradigmatic case of contemporary information influence architecture. It reflects the convergence of ideological framing, technical impersonation, and cross-national coordination, highlighting the need for longitudinal and comparative approaches to trace narrative evolution across contexts.

1.2. Contributions of the Study

This study contributes to research on Russian far-right communication in three ways. First, it develops a theory-driven multilingual dictionary for detecting far-right discourse. Second, it op- erationalizes cross-national narrative diffusion through language attribution and temporal align- ment with major political events. Third, it integrates entropy measures to capture narrative di- versification during periods of political turbulence. Overall, the study provides a scalable and reproducible approach to tracking multilingual far-right propaganda across digital ecosystems.

2. Data & Methodology

The dataset was collected from Telegram channels between January 2018 and January 2023, comprising over 15 million messages. The sampling strategy relied on a topic-based classification of the groups' primary areas of discourse. However, a substantial portion of the content was translated from Russian into the language of the target country or group, occasionally producing translation inconsistencies and residual Cyrillic characters.

A dictionary-based (Word-Topic) approach was used to classify topics and areas of discussion. While unsupervised and large language models offer exploratory advantages, this study adopts a dictionary framework to ensure theoretical consistency, cross-national comparability, and in- terpretability. The objective is not to identify latent themes, but to measure the diffusion of ideologically grounded frames derived from established scholarship. The dictionary was devel- oped through a structured process:

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1. Existing literature on contemporary far-right movements and digital extremism was systematically reviewed to identify recurring ideological themes and narratives (Brace, 2022; Calderón et al., 2020; Cardoso et al., 2025; Feischmidt & Hervik, 2015; Golder, 2016; Heft et al., 2024; Lazaridis et al., 2016; Lowe, 2024; Newth et al., 2025; Rooduijn, 2019; Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024; Yang et al., 2025; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023).
2. For each thematic dimension, language-specific lexical expressions were manually recon- structed across national contexts, since direct translation often fails to preserve ideological or cultural connotations. Dictionaries were therefore adapted separately for each language, prioritizing semantic equivalence over literal translation.
3. To evaluate cross-linguistic consistency, random samples of classified messages were man- ually inspected during multiple validation rounds. Ambiguous terms were removed or re- assigned, while LLMs (LLaMA) were additionally used to validate semantic equivalence across languages.
4. Terms were stemmed independently for each language to detect morphological variants while preserving thematic coherence.

Using this methodology, 10,197,206 messages, over two-thirds of the corpus, were successfully classified into theoretically grounded thematic categories.

The distribution of messages by language is not uniform. English and German dominate the dataset, accounting respectively for 45.16% and 44.47% of the total, followed by French (9.79%). All other languages appear only marginally: Russian represents 0.28%, Spanish and Italian each 0.14%, and Portuguese 0.03%.

While language should not be treated as a direct proxy for national affiliation, geopolitical context remains relevant. English-language content may plausibly have targeted major English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, whereas French-language content may also reflect communicative dynamics involving African regions where Russian influence has expanded in recent years.

The dictionary is fully available in the Dictionary-Github-link.

Table 1 summarizes all macro-topics in the dictionary, including a short description of macro-topics and illustrate four English keywords (non-stemmed) of each category.

Table 1. Macro-Topics and Representative English Keywords

Macro-Topics	Short Descriptions	Four Example English Keywords
Newspaper Link	Redistribution of external media content	media, press, news, article
Against mainstream	Anti-establishment	censorship, propaganda, cover-up

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	narratives	
Social Media	Platform-based dissemination	feeds, network, online, other SN
COVID	Pandemic political framing	covid, pandemic, lockdown, vaccine
Migration	Migration as threat frame	immigration, invasion, border, influx
Election	Electoral legitimacy claims	election, fraud, ballot, vote
Pure Identity vs Elites	People vs elites narrative	people, elite, citizens, clique
Democracy Crisis	Institutional decline discourse	crisis, corruption, collapse, regime
War	Geopolitical conflict framing	war, conflict, invasion, security
Mainstreaming of the Far Right	Normalization of radical discourse	legitimacy, movement, coalition
Moral Empowerment	Defense of traditional values	family, morality, tradition, protection
Hate Speech	Hostility toward out-groups	hate, traitor, enemy, threat
Gender culture	Anti-gender discourse	gender, ideology, biology, family
Economy	Economic decline narratives	economy, inflation, tax, crisis
AI	Technological anxiety framing	AI, automation, control, technology
Climate	Environmental skepticism	climate change, transition, agenda
Fake news	Delegitimization through falsity	fake news, lie, fabrication, misinformation

Lastly, for each message, the Shannon entropy was computed to quantify the degree of linguistic complexity. Entropy was calculated as:

$$H(X) = -\sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{c_i}{N} \log_2 \left(\frac{c_i}{N}\right) \quad (1)$$

where ci denotes the frequency of character i and N the total number of characters in the message. Building on these measures, the following section reports the core results of the analysis, highlighting thematic prevalence, longitudinal shifts, and differences across national contexts.

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3. Results

Figure 1 shows the evolution of total macro-topic occurrences from 2018 to 2023, with line thickness reflecting entropy levels. After a relatively stable phase between 2018 and mid-2020, a sharp increase appears around the U.S. Presidential Election and the Capitol Hill riots, accom- panied by higher entropy, indicating greater narrative complexity.

The highest levels are observed throughout 2021, during electoral tensions, COVID-related protests, and geopolitical escalation. A decline follows in early 2022, with renewed growth after the invasion of Ukraine, though with comparatively lower entropy. Overall, peaks in political elections correspond to both increased volume and heightened narrative complexity.

However, it should be noted that the majority of messages in the dataset date from late 2019 on- ward. This concentration is due to the innacessibility of retriving messages from deleted groups or users, leading to partial data loss over time.

Table 2 shows the distribution of Macro-Topics after the dictionary. The table evidences a highly concentrated distribution of macro-topics. Newspaper Link (18.53%) and Against mainstream (15.57%) together account for more than one third of the corpus, highlighting a communication strategy centered on media redistribution and anti-establishment framing.

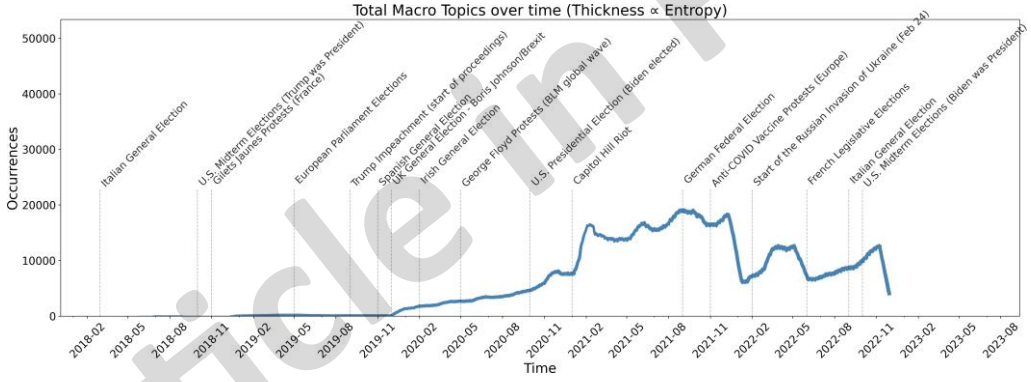


Figure 1. Dynamic by time and Political/Social events

Table 2. Distribution of Messages by Macro-Topic (Absolute Values and Percentages)

Macro-Topic	Messages	% of Total
Newspaper Link	1,889,643	18.53%
Against mainstream	1,587,730	15.57%
Social Media	1,229,292	12.06%
COVID	1,016,853	9.97%
Migration	915,397	8.98%
Election	761,192	7.47%
Pure Identity vs Elites	605,395	5.94%

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Democracy Crisis	553,741	5.43%
War	526,852	5.17%
Mainstreaming of the Far Right	325,903	3.20%
Moral Empowerment	248,851	2.44%
Hate Speech	164,546	1.61%
Gender culture	106,235	1.04%
Economy	91,276	0.90%
AI	78,603	0.77%
Climate	51,022	0.50%
Fake news	44,675	0.44%

A second tier includes Social Media, COVID, Migration, and Election, confirming the prominence of issue-specific and institutional themes. More structural ideological frames, such as Pure Identity vs Elites and Democracy Crisis, remain consistently present but less dominant. Further- more, there is no significant difference in the differentiation of macro-topics between countries and languages.

Figure 2 presents the temporal evolution of the principal macro-topics in relation to major political and social events. A pronounced increase emerges in late 2020, coinciding with the U.S. Presidential Election and the Capitol Hill riots, marking a first phase of intensified narrative production. Throughout 2021 and 2022, the increase corresponds to the German, Italian, andU.S. midterm elections, with Newspaper Link and Against mainstream consistently occupying the highest levels. But a marked contraction appears in early 2022, followed by renewed growth after the invasion of Ukraine.

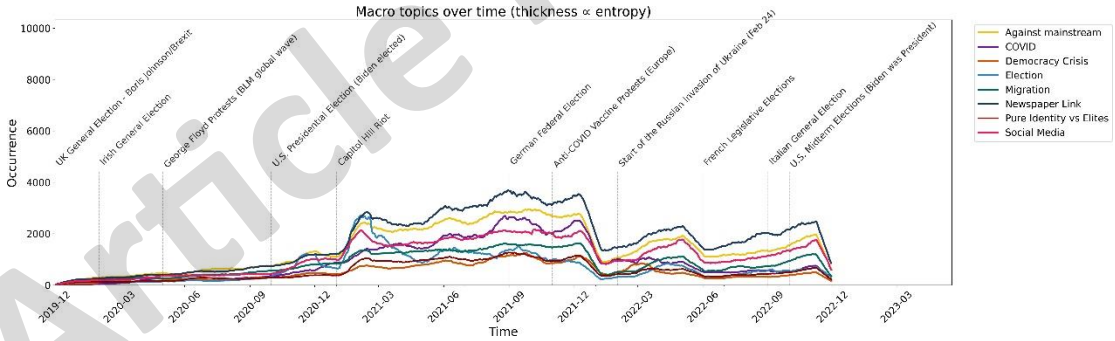


Figure 2. Macro-Topic dynamic by time and Political/Social events

It is worth noting that far-right propagandists frequently rely on quotations and external references to frame or legitimize political events. The prominence of Newspaper Link suggests the circulation of mediated content that creates chains of references reinforcing narratives associated with categories such as Against mainstream and COVID. In this context, the pattern is consistent with Doppelgänger-style strategies, whereby media-like content is

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replicated or imitated to appropriate institutional credibility and justify ideological claims. Overall, the figure highlights an alignment between macro-topic prevalence and periods of political turbulence, indicating that narrative intensity responds dynamically to major geopolitical and institutional events.

A temporal analysis of macro-topics by country is available here: GIF-Github-Link.

The GIF displays the three most prevalent macro-topics, with all remaining topics aggregated into a single category in gray. The visualization illustrates the cross-national diffusion of narra- tives over time, showing how thematic salience shifts across countries in response to political events and contextual opportunities. Overall, macro-topics appear spatially, linguistically, and temporally differentiated rather than uniformly distributed.

4. Conclusion

This study examined Russian far-right propaganda on Telegram between 2018 and 2023 using a multilingual corpus of more than 15 million messages. By combining a dictionary-based approach with temporal and entropy analysis, the paper traced how ideologically grounded narratives evolved across linguistic contexts and political events. The findings highlight the dominance of English- and German-language content and the centrality of media redistribution and anti-mainstream narratives. Newspaper Link and Against mainstream emerged as the most prevalent macro-topics, suggesting that propaganda dynamics rely heavily on the circulation and reframing of external media sources, consistent with broader Doppelgänger-style strategies. Overall, the study shows that Russian far-right propaganda on Telegram operates as an adaptive multilingual process shaped by political events, media infrastructures, and the amplification of divisive narratives.

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